

РЕЛИГИИ И РЕЛИГИОЗНАЯ БОРЬБА В РОССИИ

W. G. Wagner, K. Barnitt

A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF FEMALE ORTHODOX MONASTICISM IN IMPERIAL RUSSIA

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, female Orthodox monasticism in Russia was strikingly transformed. Not only did female communities grow rapidly in number and membership, but their demographic characteristics, geographic location, predominant organizational structure, social role, and, often, relative wealth also changed dramatically. New entrants were younger, far fewer had been married, their social background altered markedly, literacy levels rose substantially, communities became predominantly rural rather than urban, most were organized communally rather than idiorrhythmically, a higher percentage possessed substantial wealth, and most now provided a range of social services. But because of the nature of available sources, much of the dynamic of this transformation remains opaque. In particular, few members of women's monastic communities have left written sources that could provide insight into their motives, religious sensibilities, self-understandings, and experiences. Using the Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross as an example, this article demonstrates how a quantitative analysis of the membership reports submitted annually by Orthodox monastic communities to local diocesan authorities and to the Holy Synod after the early nineteenth century can be used to compensate for the limited availability of qualitative sources. Such an analysis reveals how the interaction between the internal reorganization of the convent on a communal basis and developments in its external environment transformed the convent from a small community of limited means composed mainly of older, predominantly widowed and largely illiterate women into a large and wealthy community that appealed overwhelmingly to young, unmarried, and disproportionately literate women, increasingly from the unprivileged urban and especially rural strata of society. Refs 55. Tables 11. Figs 2.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodox monasticism, Orthodox convents, female monasticism, monastic revival, Imperial Russia, Nizhnii Novgorod, quantitative analysis.

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КОЛИЧЕСТВЕННЫЙ АНАЛИЗ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ ПРАВОСЛАВНОГО ЖЕНСКОГО МОНАШЕСТВА В ИМПЕРАТОРСКОЙ РОССИИ

В XIX и начале XX столетия женское православное монашество в России резко трансформировалось. Мало того что женские общины быстро росли и по своему числу, и по количеству членов, их демографические характеристики, географическое положение, преобладающая ор-

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ганизационная структура, социальная роль и часто уровень благосостояния также резко изменились. Вновь пришедшие в монастырь послушницы были моложе, гораздо реже состояли в браке, были более обеспеченными и образованными. Таким образом, значительно изменился социальный фон женских монастырей, уровень грамотности значительно возрос, общины стали преимущественно сельскими, а не городскими, большинство из них были организованы по типу общины, а не идиоритмически, причем более высокий процент обладал значительным богатством и в большинстве случаев спектром социальных услуг. Но из-за характера доступных источников большая часть динамики этого преобразования остается трудной для понимания. В частности, немногие члены женских монашеских общин оставили письменные источники, которые могли бы дать представление об их мотивах, религиозных чувствах, самовосприятии и опыте. Используя в качестве примера нижегородский Крестовоздвиженский монастырь, его состояние в начале XIX в., авторы статьи показывают, как количественный анализ докладов о членстве, ежегодно представляемых православными монашескими общинами местным властям епархии и Священному Синоду, сравнительно с другими данными, может быть использован для компенсации ограниченной доступности качественных источников. Такой анализ показывает, как внутренняя реорганизация монастыря на общинной основе в сочетании с событиями во внешней среде превращала небольшое сообщество с ограниченными средствами, состоявшее в основном из более пожилых неграмотных женщин, преимущественно вдов, в большую и процветающую общину, которую образовывали в своем большинстве молодые незамужние женщины, несоизмеримо более грамотные, все чаще из непривилегированных городских и особенно сельских слоев населения. Библиогр. 55 назв. Табл. 11. Ил. 2.

Ключевые слова: Русская православная церковь, православное монашество, православные женские монастыри, женское монашество, возрождение монашества, имперская Россия, Нижний Новгород, количественные методы исторического анализа.

Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russian Orthodox monasticism experienced a significant revival from the severe contraction produced by the reforms introduced by Catherine II in 1764 [Komissarenko 1990, pp. 108–24; Smolich 1997, pp. 274–82; de Madariaga. 1981, pp 23, 97–8, 109–22, 125–7, 503–18; Emchenko 2003, pp. 171–82, 188–213].¹ But the nature and dynamics of this revival differed for male and female monastic communities in important ways. Most visibly, although both male and female communities grew in number and membership, female communities did so much more rapidly and extensively than did their male counterparts. As a consequence, by the latter part of the nineteenth century Russian Orthodox monasticism had become overwhelmingly female, reversing the relative weight of male and female monasticism that had prevailed historically since the early eleventh century. In addition, the demographic characteristics, geographic location, predominant organizational structure, social role, and, often, relative wealth of female communities also changed dramatically. New entrants grew increasingly younger, far fewer had ever been married, the social composition of communities altered markedly, literacy levels rose substantially, communities became predominantly rural rather than urban, most were organized communally rather than idiorhythmically, a higher percentage than in the past possessed substantial wealth, and most now offered a range of educational and welfare services to the wider Orthodox community in addition to liturgical and spiritual services. The revival of female Russian Orthodox monasticism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in other words, entailed not merely impressive growth but also striking transformation [Kenworthy 2010; Zyrianov 2002; Kirichenko 2010; Emchenko 2002]. Much of the dynamic of this

¹ Briefly, Catherine's reforms drastically reduced and severely limited both the number of monastic communities and the size of their membership and expropriated all monastic property, including land and serfs. To provide for their support, the state paid monastic communities an annual subvention and their allotted members an annual stipend.

transformation, however, and of life within women's monastic communities, remains opaque because of the nature of available sources. In particular, due to the tradition of Russian Orthodox monastic women expressing themselves primarily through action, artistic media, and liturgical observances and other forms of devotional practice, few of the women who took part in and shaped the process of female monastic transformation have left written sources that could provide insight into their motives, religious and self-understandings, and experiences.

Using the Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross as an example, this article seeks to demonstrate how the membership reports submitted annually by Orthodox monastic communities to local diocesan authorities and the Holy Synod after the early nineteenth century can be used to compensate for the limited availability of qualitative sources.² Arranged according to seniority within monastic ranks, these reports included such information for each member of the community as her age, social estate, previous marital status, level of literacy and, occasionally, place of education, years of entry into the community and of taking novice and full vows, obediences performed, any offices held and awards received, the character of conduct during the previous year, and, after the 1860's, the place of prior residence. Each report thus provides a snapshot of the composition of a community, and of key aspects of life within it, for a given year. Cumulatively, the reports demonstrate both the trends across time for the different characteristics recorded in them and the trajectory of individual women's lives within a community. In addition, data compiled from the reports can be analyzed statistically to determine whether particular characteristics or trends influenced others. While these types of data and analysis admittedly reveal little about the religious motivations and understandings that led an increasing number of Russian Orthodox women to undertake a monastic life during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they nonetheless provide valuable insight into the broader motivations of these women by suggesting how changes in the internal organization and practices of monastic communities and developments in their external environment affected the appeal and accessibility of monasticism for different groups of women. They also can illuminate the values and practices that shaped life within female monastic communities, for example by measuring the degree to which worldly attributes influenced internal relationships and responsibilities and progress through the monastic ranks.

The Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross offers a particularly good case study for demonstrating the usefulness of this analytical approach. Located in the city of Nizhnii Novgorod, the convent was formed from the merger of the two convents existing in the city at the time of Catherine's reforms and was one of only two convents remaining in Nizhnii Novgorod diocese after the reforms [Wagner 2007].³ Over the course of the nineteenth century, as Nizhnii Novgorod grew into a major industrial, financial, and cultural center, the convent underwent all aspects of the transformation of female Orthodox monasticism described above (other than being rural), becoming one of the largest and wealthiest monastic communities in Nizhnii Novgorod diocese [Wagner

² The reports initially were entitled *Vedomosti o Nastoiatel'nitse, monakhiniakh i poslushnitsakh* and later *Posluzhnyye spiski*. Established by Peter I in 1721, the Holy Synod was the central administrative and governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church during the imperial period. Although the Synod regularly requested information on membership and other matters from monastic communities during the latter part of the eighteenth century, it did not standardize the process until the early nineteenth century.

³ Catherine's reforms reduced the number of male monasteries in Nizhnii Novgorod diocese from 25 to 8 and the number of convents from 13 to two. At the time of the reforms, there were roughly 300 nuns and an equal number of novices living at the 13 convents in the diocese. The reforms allotted only 17 places to each of the two remaining convents.

2006; Wagner 2003; Wagner 2010]. The diocese in turn experienced the highest level of female monastic growth in the Russian empire, with the number of convents increasing between 1819–1917 from two to seventeen and their membership, from less than 200 to nearly 7000 [Wagner 2006; Bukova 2003; Emchenko 2002; Kirichenko 2010; Beliakova, Beliakova, and Emchenko 2011]. The Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross thus lay both in a city that was intensively undergoing the “modernizing” changes that characterized many urban centers in late imperial Russia and in the region of the empire that witnessed the greatest extent of female monastic growth. A statistical analysis of the membership of the convent between 1764 and 1917 suggests that these two developments were related. After the early nineteenth century, the internal reorganization of the convent on a communal basis interacted with developments in the external environment to increase the attractiveness and accessibility of a monastic life for certain groups of women while simultaneously decreasing its appeal for others, thereby contributing significantly to the transformation of the character and social roles of the convent.

Methodology

The analysis is based on data compiled from thirteen membership reports (hereafter, censuses), generally selected at ten-year intervals, submitted by the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross between 1816 and 1917.⁴ The information for each woman in each census was entered into a data base, which then calculated the totals and percentages for such characteristics as social status, marital status, level of literacy, province of prior residence, and obediences performed for each census year and displayed the trends across time. This data provided the basis for a statistical analysis of the effects of particular characteristics and trends on others during and across five time periods: 1764–1816, 1816–1856, 1866–1917, 1866–1894 (or in some cases, 1896), and 1896–1917. These periods were selected to identify the possible effects on the convent of its reorganization on a communal basis in 1807 and relocation from the center to the outskirts of Nizhnii Novgorod in 1815, the movement for monastic revival and reform that emerged in Russian Orthodoxy in the late eighteenth century, and significant developments that occurred in the external world, particularly the changing economy and social and cultural environment of Nizhnii Novgorod in the first half of the nineteenth century, the abolition of serfdom in 1861 and other “great reforms” introduced during the reign of Alexander II, and the substantial social, economic, and cultural developments that characterized late imperial Russia. The post-emancipation period was further subdivided to reflect the acceleration of urban and industrial growth, the expansion of education for women, and the cultural ferment that took place after the mid-1880s and the social and political unrest of the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, information from reports from the eighteenth century could not be included in the data base because of differences in terminology and content, although this information is sufficient to provide a baseline for the evaluation of developments in the later periods. In addition, the censuses for 1906 and 1917 reported only the total number of probationers at the convent rather than providing information on these women

⁴ The 1887 census was used because that for 1886 was unavailable; the 1894 census was used in addition to that for 1896 because it contained additional information; the 1902 census was used in addition to that for 1906 because it was the last to provide information on individual probationers; and the 1917 census was used because it was the last one submitted prior to the disruptions caused by the October Revolution.

individually, which renders use of the data for these years problematic for certain comparisons and analyses.⁵

Two types of analysis will be discussed. In this article, data drawn from all thirteen censuses will be used to demonstrate the trends across time in the age of entry and marital status, the social status, the level of literacy, and the geographic origin both of all members of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross and of particular vocational groups (i.e., nuns, novices, and probationers or postulants). While these trends generally conformed with those found for other convents (and, to some degree, male monasteries) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the more nuanced analysis made possible by our methodology enables a refinement and extension of the conclusions that have been drawn from this type of data. In a subsequent article, several types of statistical analysis will be used to demonstrate the degree to which particular characteristics and trends affected others in a statistically significant way. While the first type of analysis illuminates particularly revealingly the ways in which internal reorganization and developments in the external world shaped the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second offers insight into the values and practices that shaped life within the community.

The Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross in the eighteenth century

At the time the Nizhnii Novgorod Conception and Procession Convents were merged to form the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, they were typical of most convents in eighteenth-century imperial Russia. They were located in an urban environment, were organized idiorrhythmically, possessed very modest means, and were greatly overshadowed in religious, economic, and cultural importance by their local male counterparts [Wagner 2007].⁶ Both convents also reflected the character of Nizhnii Novgorod as a prominent administrative, military, commercial, and ecclesiastical center. Both received modest subventions that had been awarded by the state but were paid from local customs and trade duties, as well as rents from a few shops in the city that most likely had been donated by local merchants or tradesmen. Both also were supported by payments for religious services and donations made by the local population. Like most convents prior to 1764, and in contrast to most male monasteries, neither convent possessed arable land or serfs. Reflecting the convents' idiorrhythmic organization, members largely supported themselves individually, through handicraft work and trade, begging and other forms of charity, any personal property they had brought with them, and in some cases the rental of space in their cells—which were owned personally—to other sisters. Apart from replacing one form of state subvention with another, equally modest but now paid partly to stipendiary sisters individually, Catherine's reforms had little impact on these arrangements and practices

⁵ In addition, the province of prior residence was not reported regularly until the 1876 census, and after 1896 the obediences for novices and probationers generally were listed simply as “as assigned by the abbeſs.” There also were a significant number of discrepancies, mostly minor, in some of the information given for the same woman in different censuses (e.g., year of birth, entry into the convent, or taking vows, social status, province of prior residence, etc.). These were resolved in the way that was most consistent with the overall record for the woman in question.

⁶ In idiorrhythmic convents, women provided for themselves and could retain property individually, cells were personally owned, common refectory was not required, obediences were more limited, and members had much greater control over their activities and time than in communally organized convents.

**Table 1. Nizhnii Novgorod Procession and Conception Convents and
Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Social Background, 1764–1795**

	<u>Clergy</u>		<u>Town Popula.¹</u>		<u>Official</u>		<u>Military/ Soldier</u>		<u>Nobility</u>		<u>House Servant/ Serf²</u>		<u>Other Peasant</u>		<u>Other/ Not Given</u>	
<u>1764</u>	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Conception and Procession Convents, nuns	8	13.3	12	20.0	6	10.0	9	15.0	1	1.7	14	23.3	9	15.0	1	1.7
Conception Convent, novices and women living at the convent without having taken monastic vows (1762) ³	<u>1</u>	2.4	<u>11</u>	26.2	<u>1</u>	2.4	<u>4</u>	9.5	<u>0</u>	0.0	<u>1</u>	2.4	<u>2</u>	4.8	<u>22</u>	52.4
Total	9	8.8	23	22.5	7	6.9	13	12.7	1	1.0	15	14.7	11	10.8	23	22.5
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1776</u>																
Stipendiary nuns	8	47.1	1	5.9	0	0.0	1	5.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	41.2	0	0.0
Supernumerary nuns	<u>3</u>	11.1	<u>3</u>	11.1	<u>0</u>	0.0	<u>1</u>	3.7	<u>0</u>	0.0	<u>11</u>	40.7	<u>9</u>	33.3	<u>0</u>	0.0
Total	11	25.0	4	9.1	0	0.0	2	4.5	0	0.0	11	25.0	16	36.4	0	0.0
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1785</u>																
Novices and women living at convent without having taken monastic vows	0	0.0	6	17.6	5	14.7	11	32.4	0	0.0	1	2.9	11	32.4	0	0.0
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1792</u>																
Stipendiary nuns	8	47.1	3	17.6	2	11.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.9	3	17.6
Novices and women living at convent without having taken monastic vows	<u>4</u>	14.8	<u>3</u>	11.1	<u>6</u>	22.2	<u>6</u>	22.2	<u>0</u>	0.0	<u>0</u>	0.0	<u>8</u>	29.6	<u>0</u>	0.0
Total	12	27.3	6	13.6	8	18.2	6	13.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	9	20.5	3	6.8
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1795</u>																
Novices and women living at convent without having taken monastic vows	9	31.0	0	0.0	4	13.8	8	27.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	8	27.6	0	0.0

Sources: TsANO, f. 570, op. 554 za 1762 g., d. 22, za 1764 g., d. 46; op. 555 za 1776 g., d. 27, ll. 11–20, za 1792 g., d. 47, ll. 3–6; f. 582, op. 1, dd. 6, 20.

¹ For 1764 and 1776 this category consists of *posadskie liudi* and other groups, such as *iamshchiki*, permanently resident in the city; for 1785, 1792, and 1795 it consists almost entirely of *meshchanki*.

² This category was not used in the 1792 and 1795 reports.

³ This information was not given for the Procession Convent.

**Table 2. Nizhnii Novgorod Procession and Conception Convents and
Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Place of Previous Residence, 1764–1776**

	City of N. Novgorod	N. Novgorod District	Other Districts in		Not given/ clear
			N. Novgorod Prov.	Elsewhere	
<i>Conception and Procession Convents, 1764</i>					
Nuns	22	11	9	–	18
<i>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1776</i>					
Stipendiary nuns	2	9	3	1	2
Supernumerary nuns	<u>4</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>–</u>
Total	6	23	8	5	2

Sources: TsANO, f. 570, op. 554 za 1764 g., d. 46; op. 555 za 1776 g., d. 27, ll. 11–20.

[Wagner 2007].⁷ As a result, the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross essentially preserved the character of its two predecessors.

The same was true with regard to the social composition and apparent social function of the new convent. Indeed, the social complexion and role of female monasticism in Nizhnii Novgorod remained remarkably consistent throughout the eighteenth century. As was the case in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, at the moment of reform in 1764 the membership of the Conception and Procession Convents was composed mainly of women from Nizhnii Novgorod itself and reflected the character of the city's population. In that year, as Table 1 indicates, the nuns at the two convents were drawn predominantly from the middling strata of the city's population (58.3 %), with a significant number also being former household servants or serfs (23.3 %); only one nun was recorded as being from the nobility, although some of the women identified as being from military families most likely also had noble status. The social background of novices and other women living at the Conception Convent without having taken monastic vows only two years earlier was similar (Table 1).⁸ The inclusion of a large number of supernumerary (*zashtatnye*) nuns from several convents in the diocese, mostly located in small towns or rural areas, that had been dissolved by Catherine's reforms temporarily increased the number and percentage of women from the peasantry at the convent. But as these women died or moved away, the social composition of the convent assumed its previous complexion, with two notable differences. First, due to the closure of all but one other convent in the diocese, the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross now drew its members from a wider geographic area, although mostly still from within the diocese (Table 2). Second, perhaps reflecting this situation and the tendency of local diocesan authorities and the state to use convents to provide welfare for women from the clerical estate and the military respectively, the number and percentage of members from the clergy and from military families had

⁷ As a result of Catherine's reforms, the shops were expropriated, there could be no more than 17 fully vowed nuns at the convent at any given time, and only these women received a stipend. All other women living at the convent, generally as probationers, had to support themselves. During the nineteenth century the limit on the number of nuns was raised first to 29 and then to 100.

⁸ Information on the novices and other women living at the Procession Convent was not available.

**Table 3. Nizhnii Novgorod Procession and Conception Convents and
Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Marital Status, 1764–1795**

	<u>Widow</u>		<u>Unmarried</u>		<u>Unclear</u>	
<u>1764</u>	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Conception and Procession Convents, nuns	41	68.3	18	30.0	1	1.7
Conception Convent, novices and women living at the convent without having taken monastic vows (1762) ¹	<u>25</u>	78.1	<u>4</u>	12.5	<u>3</u>	9.4
Total	66	71.7	22	23.9	4	4.4
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1776</u>						
Stipendiary nuns	7	41.2	10	58.8	–	0.0
Supernumerary nuns	<u>4</u>	14.8	<u>23</u>	85.2	–	0.0
Total	11	25.0	33	75.0	–	0.0
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1785</u>						
Novices and women living at convent without having taken monastic vows	22	64.7	12	35.3	0	0.0
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1792</u>						
Stipendiary nuns	7	41.2	8	47.1	2	11.7
Novices and women living at convent without having taken monastic vows	<u>19</u>	70.4	<u>6</u>	22.2	<u>2</u>	7.4
Total	26	59.1	14	31.8	4	9.1
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1795</u>						
Novices and women living at convent without having taken monastic vows	20	69.0	9	31.0	0	0.0

Sources: TsANO, f. 570, op. 554 za 1762 g., d. 22, za 1764 g., d. 46; op. 555 za 1776 g., d. 27, ll. 11–20, za 1792 g., d. 47, ll. 3–6; f. 582, op. 1, dd. 6, 20.

¹ This information was not given for the Procession Convent.

increased by the latter part of the eighteenth century, while the number and percentage of members from the city's tax-paying population had declined (Table 1).⁹

The prior marital status and age of members of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross also exhibited considerable continuity with the convent's predecessors. As Table 3 demonstrates, widows composed the overwhelming majority of members of the Conception and Procession Convents on the eve of their merger and of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross still at the end of the eighteenth century. In all three cases, most members also were elderly for the time, and nuns typically had taken their vows well after the legally prescribed minimum age of 50 (Table 4). Again, the presence of supernumerary nuns from dissolved convents within the diocese created a temporary anomaly, with these nuns being predominantly unmarried (85.2 %) and generally having taken their vows at an earlier age than the stipendiary nuns at the convent (Tables 3 and 4).¹⁰ These differences between supernumerary and stipendiary nuns, together with the difference in their social profile, suggest that urban convents may have functioned socially somewhat differently

⁹ The category of household servants and serfs was not used in the reports for 1792 and 1795; women with these social statuses appear to have been incorporated into the general category of "peasants".

¹⁰ Many in fact appear to have taken their vows before the legally prescribed minimum age of 50.

**Table 4. Nizhnii Novgorod Procession and Conception Convents and
Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Current Age and Age When Monastic Vows Taken, 1764–1792**

1764	90+	80–89	70–79	60–69	50–59	40–49	30–39	20–29	<20	Unclear
<i>Current Age</i>										
Conception and Procession Convents, nuns	3	8	20	18	7	2	–	–	–	2
Conception Convent, novices and women living at the convent without having taken monastic vows (1762) ¹	–	–	4	7	10	7	3	1	–	–
<i>Age When Monastic Vows Taken</i>										
Conception and Procession Convents, nuns	–	1	2	16	16	13	6	3	2	1
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1776</u>										
<i>Current Age</i>										
Stipendiary nuns	1	4	7	2	2	–	–	–	–	1
Supernumerary nuns	2	6	9	7	3	–	–	–	–	–
<i>Age When Monastic Vows Taken</i>										
Stipendiary nuns	–	–	2	1	1	8	2	2	–	1
Supernumerary nuns	–	–	3	4	4	1	4	5	2	4
<u>Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, 1792</u>										
<i>Current Age</i>										
Stipendiary nuns	–	4	2	2	4	1	–	–	–	4
Novices and women living at convent without having taken monastic vows	–	1	2	5	5	10	2	–	–	–

Sources: TsANO, f. 570, op. 554 za 1762 g., d. 22, za 1764 g., d. 46; op. 555 za 1776 g., d. 27, ll. 11–20, za 1792 g., d. 47, ll. 3–6; f. 582, op. 1, d. 6, ll. 19–19ob.

¹ This information was not given for the Procession Convent.

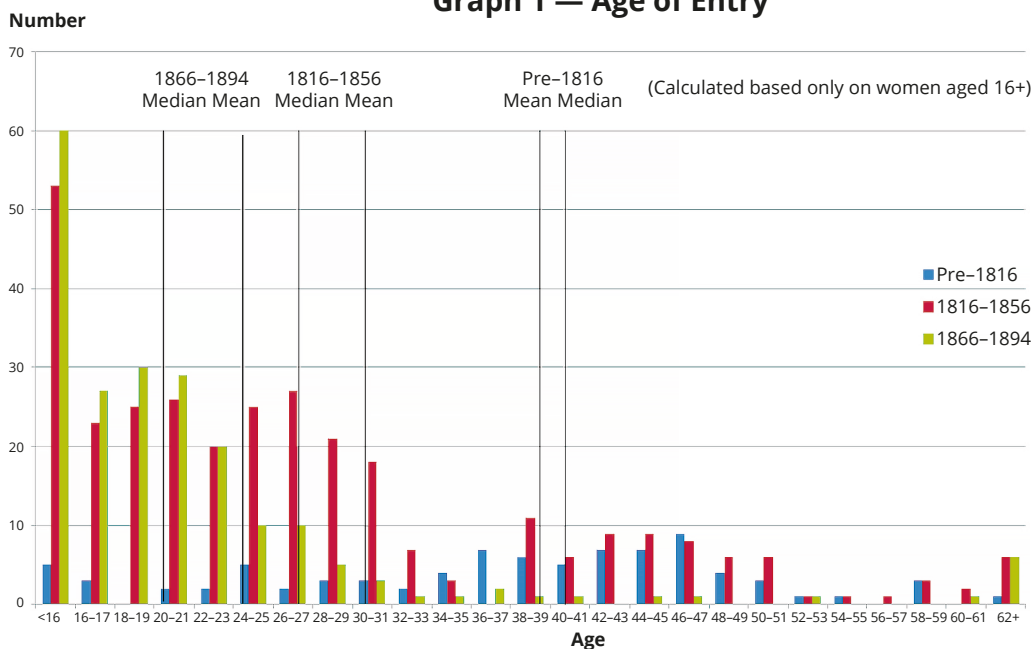
than those located in small towns and rural areas. But at least in Nizhnii Novgorod, the combination of social background, prior marital status, age structure, and the age when most nuns took their vows suggests that in the eighteenth century—before as well as after Catherine’s reforms—the convents in the city served socially as a place of retirement or refuge for elderly widows and unmarried daughters especially of middling social groups once their family and other responsibilities had been fulfilled, and for manumitted household servants late in life. The volume of correspondence for this period in the archive of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross that concerns the placement of widows supports this conclusion [TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 3, 7–11, 14–15ob., 18, d. 5, l. 3, d. 9, ll. 1–3, 5, d. 17, ll. 24, 27; for earlier years, f. 570, op. 552 za 1741 g., dd. 77, 79, 82; op. 553 za 1746 g., dd. 138, 139, za 1748 g., dd. 261, 262].¹¹

¹¹ In her excellent dissertation on the Suzdal Convent of the Intercession, Marlyn Miller emphasizes the impact of state actions and policies on the demographic characteristics of the membership of the convent during the eighteenth century [Miller 2009; see also Schmähling 2009; Claus 1961].

Nineteenth-century trends and transformations

This social role changed dramatically during the nineteenth century, as the internal reorganization of the convent and external developments differentially affected the accessibility and apparent attractiveness of a monastic life for different groups of women. Under the influence of these developments, during the first half of the century the convent ceased to serve socially as a place of retirement for elderly widows and unmarried women and became instead a form of female community life chosen mainly by young, unmarried, and disproportionately literate women. Although initially this form of community life appealed to a socially diverse group of women, in the conditions prevailing after the abolition of serfdom and other Alexandrine reforms it increasingly attracted women primarily from the unprivileged strata of urban and, especially, rural society.

Graph 1 — Age of Entry



The progressive decline in the age of entry and the number of widows among new members of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross during the nineteenth century can be seen clearly in Graphs 1 and 2 and Tables 3 and 5. From the beginning of the century, the median and mean age of women entering the convent declined steadily, from 40 and 38.8 for those who entered prior to 1816 to 27 and 30.4 for those who did so between 1816–1856 and to 20 and 24.1 for those entering between 1866–1894.¹² Correspondingly, the pattern of the age distribution of women when they entered the convent also changed substantially over the three periods, clustering in the late 30's and the 40's for the first period, bifurcated between the early 40's and the mid to late 20's for the second period,

¹² Because during the nineteenth century an increasing number of young girls entered the convent only temporarily as either orphans or students at its school, only members aged 16 and older were used to compute the median and mean ages of entry for all three periods.

*Table 5. Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Marital Status, 1802–1917*

	Nuns				Novices and Probationers			
	<u>Widows</u>		<u>Unmarried</u>		<u>Widows</u>		<u>Unmarried</u>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1802 ¹	–	–	–	–	15	45.5	17	51.5
1806	8	47.1	9	52.9	11	28.2	28	71.8
1816	5	17.2	24	82.8	8	15.7	43	84.3
1826	6	17.6	28	82.4	10	13.5	64	86.5
1836	6	18.2	27	81.8	17	13.9	105	86.1
1846	3	10.0	27	90.0	11	8.5	118	91.5
1856	1	3.2	30	96.8	12	8.0	138	92.0
1866 ²	6	8.8	62	91.2	6	6.3	89	93.7
1876	2	2.4	82	97.6	4	3.5	109	96.5
1887	2	2.7	73	97.3	2	1.3	148	98.7
1896	2	3.1	62	96.9	2	1.1	175	98.9
1906	3	3.7	79	96.3	2 ³	2.7 ³	72 ³	97.3 ³
1917	3	4.5	63	95.5	2 ³	2.9 ³	67 ³	97.1 ³

Sources: TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 6, 20, 47, 88, 129, 211, 329, 385, 460, 531, 588; f. 570, op. 556 za 1806 g., d. 14, op. 559 za 1906 g., d. 62, za 1917 g., d. 56a.

¹ This information was not provided for nuns.

² In 1857 the number of nuns allowed at the convent was increased from 32 to 100.

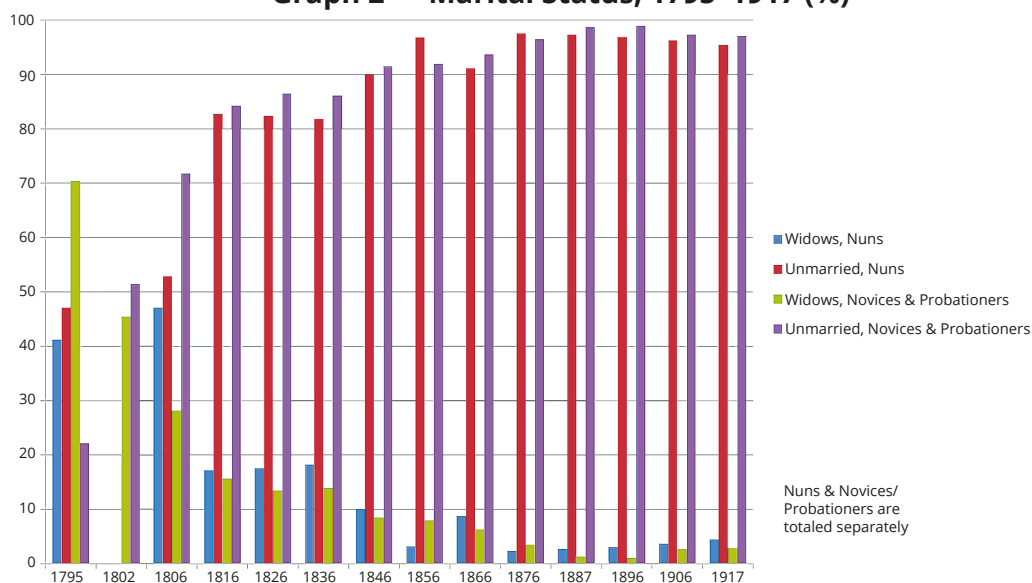
³ Because the reports for 1906 and 1917 reported only the aggregate number of probationers (126 and 230 respectively) and did not provide individual information for these women, these totals and percentages include only novices.

and clustering in the late teens and early 20's—the age range within which most women married—for the third period (Graph 1). One consequence of this decline, given the minimum age at which women legally could take full monastic vows, was an increase in the average number of years women lived at the convent before taking full vows, from 14.6 for those who entered the convent prior to 1816 to 21.9 for those who did so between 1816–1856 and 26.9 for women entering the convent between 1866–1894.¹³ The decline in the percentage of widows in the convent's membership was equally striking. Among the newest members of the community, probationers and novices, the percentage of widows fell from 69.0 in 1795 to 45.5 in 1802, 15.7 in 1816, 8.0 in 1856, and 1.3 in 1887. Through the 1830's this decline was due mainly to the rapid increase in the number of unmarried women entering the convent, but thereafter the absolute number of widows also declined steadily (Graph 2 and Tables 3 and 5). Clearly, already in the years prior to the abolition of serfdom, a religious life in a female community had become a choice now made most often by increasingly younger women in preference to marriage, family life, and the other possibilities open to them, given their social position.

The causes of this transformation are not fully clear. Since these trends appear to have characterized the revival of female Orthodox monasticism in late imperial Russia as a whole (although more work on this issue is needed), obviously broader than local influences were involved [Miller 2009, pp. 134–40; Miller 2013; Kirichenko 2010; Emchenko 2002; Zirianov

¹³ The time that elapsed before novice vows were taken was not affected.

Graph 2 — Marital Status, 1795–1917 (%)



2002, pp. 18–26, 135–41, 161–70]. But within Nizhnii Novgorod diocese, at least part of the explanation for these trends would seem to be the situation created by the severe reduction of monastic places available after Catherine’s reforms. Not only was the number of convents in the diocese reduced to only two, but only 17 stipendiary places were allowed at each of these convents [Wagner 2007]. It will be recalled that the supernumerary nuns who were transferred to the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross after the closure of their original convents were predominantly unmarried and most had begun their monastic careers at a significantly younger age than the sisters already at the convent. Perhaps this indicates a desire for the monastic life especially among women from small towns and rural areas that was very difficult to satisfy after the reforms (see Tables 3 and 4). In response to this situation, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century a number of officially unrecognized women’s communities emerged in the diocese that enabled their members to follow essentially a monastic life informally. A central feature of these communities was their communal organization, which both reflected the monastic ideal that guided them and provided the labor and material means necessary for their existence [Meehan-Waters 1986; Meehan-Waters 1992; Kirichenko 20010; Emchenko 2002; Wagner 2006; Bukova 2003].

The reorganization of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross on a communal basis between 1802 and 1807 appears to have helped precipitate the trends toward a lower age of entry and percentage of widows among members of the convent by similarly enabling this existing desire for a monastic life by younger, unmarried women to be satisfied. Engineered by the local archbishop and carried out by the new abbess, Dorofeia (1802–1826), with the support of twenty-two sisters who accompanied her from the Trinity Convent in Penza, the reorganization was inspired by the monastic ideals being promoted in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Russia by advocates of reform such as Metropolitans Gavriil (Petrov), Platon (Levshin), and Filaret (Drozdov) [Kenworthy 2010; Titlinov 1916, pp. 104–15, 681–757; Tsapina 2001; Lisovoi 2002; Meehan-Waters 1991]. Its im-

plementation, however, provoked considerable conflict within the convent, culminating in the transfer of several older members elsewhere [TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 6, 17, 18, 221, 23, 26, 32, 33; f. 570, op. 556 za 1806 g., d. 14; RGIA, f. 796, op. 87, d. 1033; Wagner 2010, pp. 85–90; Al'bitskii and Mamontov 1913, pp. 13–16, 30–31]. Although the reasons for the resistance to a communal form of organization by its opponents are not given, one likely source was the substantial reduction in the autonomy of sisters entailed by the change. As a result of the reorganization, for example, all the resources of the convent and income from the labor of sisters were now pooled and managed by the abbess and other officers for the needs and well-being of the community as a whole, common refectory was required rather than optional, and cells were controlled and obediences assigned by the abbess. While these changes made life in the convent less attractive for older women, particularly those with independent means, whose time, activities, labor, and property now would be subject to greater control by the abbess, they conversely made it more accessible as well as attractive to younger women. The more productive organization of the sisters' labor, more effective marketing of the goods they produced for sale, and pooling of the proceeds from the sale of these goods resulting from communal organization substantially increased the convent's annual income, thereby enabling it to support more members, on whose labor it in turn came to rely both materially and to realize its religious goals. For their part, these women now officially could pursue a pious, meaningful, spiritually enriching, respected, and materially secure monastic life in a community of peers.

The distribution of obediences shown in Table 6 demonstrates how the convent's leadership used the division of labor made possible by communal organization to serve the community's religious purposes while providing for the material needs of a larger membership (Table 7). Between 1816 and 1894, roughly a quarter of the obediences performed by sisters represented religious activities as narrowly defined, for example singing in the choirs, serving in churches and chapels, reading the psalter or in the refectory and overseeing the cemetery. These were activities that simultaneously fulfilled the religious objectives of the convent, contributed to the spiritual experiences of its individual

*Table 6. Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Distribution of Obediences, 1816–1894*

	<u>Domestic</u>		<u>Education/ Welfare</u>		<u>Church/ Religious</u>		<u>Handicrafts</u>		<u>Gold- Sewing</u>		<u>Icon Painting</u>		<u>Unassigned Due to Illness</u>		<u>Unspecified</u>	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1816	13	14.6	14	15.7	19	21.3	13	14.6	14	15.7	0	0.0	5	5.6	11	12.4
1826	29	24.0	8	6.6	37	30.1	10	8.3	23	19.0	0	0.0	3	2.3	11	9.1
1836	32	20.3	8	5.1	34	31.5	49	31.0	10	6.3	0	0.0	8	5.1	17	10.8
1846	31	17.5	17	9.6	45	25.4	43	24.3	14	7.9	2	1.1	9	5.1	16	9.0
1856	32	17.1	19	10.2	51	27.3	34	18.2	15	8.0	0	0.0	10	5.3	26	13.9
1866	25	13.5	10	5.4	56	30.1	41	22.2	9	4.9	9	4.9	25	13.5	10	5.4
1876	35	16.4	8	3.8	50	23.5	51	23.9	16	7.5	22	10.3	11	5.2	20	9.3
1877	32	13.6	6	2.5	40	16.9	73	30.9	11	4.7	16	6.8	10	4.2	48	20.3
1894	49	17.1	14	4.9	62	21.6	87	30.3	17	5.9	23	8.0	9	3.1	26	9.1

Sources: TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 47, 88, 129, 211, 329, 385, 460, 531, 577.

**Table 7. Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Social Background, 1816–1894**

	<u>Clergy</u>			<u>Honored Citizens¹</u>			<u>Merchants</u>			<u>Meshchanstvo</u>			<u>Military?Enlisted</u>		
	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.
1816	5	1	6	--	--	--	1	0	0	1	4	12	3	0	3
Total/%	12 – 16.0			-- -- --			1 – 1.3			17 – 22.7			6 – 8.0		
1826	3	5	3	--	--	--	1	0	0	5	8	12	3	0	2
Total/%	11 – 10.9			-- -- --			1 – 1.0			25 – 24.8			5 – 5.0		
1836	1	18	7	0	0	0	2	0	2	5	18	5	4	2	4
Total/%	26 – 17.0			0 – 0.0			4 – 2.6			28 – 18.3			10 – 6.5		
1846	3	24	4	0	0	0	2	1	2	4	21	6	5	5	2
Total/%	31 – 20.0			0 – 0.0			5 – 3.2			31 – 20.0			12 – 7.7		
1856	7	24	15	0	0	0	1	4	0	5	24	11	6	9	3
Total/%	46 – 26.4			0 – 0.0			5 – 2.9			40 – 23.0			18 – 10.3		
1866 ²	16	27	1	0	0	0	4	2	2	13	20	3	4	4	1
Total/%	44 – 27.5			0 – 0.0			8 – 5.0			36 – 22.5			9 – 5.6		
1876	20	26	3	0	0	0	3	5	0	22	25	3	4	6	0
Total/%	49 – 25.3			0 – 0.0			8 – 4.1			50 – 25.8			10 – 5.2		
1887	19	25	1	0	0	1	4	1	0	19	21	11	4	2	0
Total/%	45 – 20.1			1 – 0.4			5 – 2.2			51 – 22.8			6 – 2.7		
1896	17	22	10	0	0	1	2	1	0	20	15	16	3	0	2
Total/%	49 – 20.6			1 – 0.4			3 – 1.3			51 – 21.4			5 – 2.1		
1902	20	28	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	22	12	15	2	0	1
Total/%	48 – 20.6			1 – 0.4			3 – 1.3			49 – 21.0			3 – 1.3		
1906 ³	25	20	NA	0	0	NA	3	0	NA	22	10	NA	2	1	NA
Total/%	45 – 29.2			0 – 0.0			3 – 1.9			32 – 20.8			3 – 1.9		
1917 ³	16	12	NA	0	0	NA	2	0	NA	14	13	NA	0	1	NA
Total/%	28 – 21.1			0 – 0.0			2 – 1.5			27 – 20.3			1 – 0.8		

	<u>Military/Officers</u>			<u>Nobility</u>			<u>Peasants</u>			<u>State Officials</u>			<u>Total</u>
	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	Nuns	Novs.	Probs.	
1816	7	2	4	4	1	1	2	5	6	6	0	1	75
Total/%	13 – 17.3			6 – 8.0			13 – 17.5			7 – 9.3			
1826	3	4	5	4	1	1	12	10	5	2	2	0	101
Total/%	12 – 11.9			6 – 5.9			37 – 36.6			4 – 4.0			
1836	1	7	2	3	1	0	13	30	18	3	4	3	153
Total/%	10 – 6.5			4 – 2.6			61 – 39.9			10 – 6.8			
1846	1	4	2	2	0	1	10	39	12	2	3	0	155
Total/%	7 – 4.5			3 – 1.9			61 – 39.4			5 – 3.2			
1856	1	1	1	2	3	2	8	37	8	0	1	1	174
Total/%	3 – 1.7			7 – 4.0			53 – 30.5			2 – 1.1			
1866 ²	0	1	1	7	12	1	21	18	2	0	0	0	160
Total/%	2 1.3			20 – 12.5			41 – 25.6			0 – 0.0			
1876	0	0	1	7	6	1	25	23	12	0	1	1	194

Total/%	1 – 0.5			14 – 7.2			60 – 30.9			2 – 1.0			
1887	0	0	0	8	5	3	21	48	31	0	0	0	224
Total/%	0 – 0.0			16 – 7.1			100 – 44.6			0 – 0.0			
1896	0	0	0	5	3	2	17	37	65	0	0	0	238
Total/%	0 – 0.0			10 – 4.2			119 – 50.0			0 – 0.0			
1902	0	0	0	1	2	0	25	41	60	0	0	0	233
Total/%	0 – 0.0			3 – 1.3			126 – 54.1			0 – 0.0			
1906 ³	0	0	NA	3	1	NA	26	41	NA	0	0	NA	154 ²
Total/%	0 – 0.0			4 – 2.6			67 – 43.5			0 – 0.0			
1917 ³	0	0	NA	2	1	NA	31	41	NA	0	0	NA	133 ²
Total/%	0 – 0.0			3 – 2.3			72 – 54.1			0 – 0.0			

Sources: TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 47, 88, 129, 211, 329, 385, 460, 531, 588, 631; f. 570, op. 559 za 1906 g., d. 62, za 1917 g., d. 56a.

¹ This status was not established until 1832.

² In 1857 the number of nuns allowed at the convent was increased from 32 to 100.

³ Only the total number of probationers was reported for 1906 (126) and 1917 (230).

members, and frequently generated revenue. A comparable percentage was devoted to handicraft work, which mainly provided for the internal needs of the convent — making and repairing clothing and shoes for members, performing minor maintenance and the like — and also produced some goods for sale. About 15–20 % of the obediences assigned regularly concerned such domestic tasks as working in the kitchen, the kvass brewery, refectory, and laundry and tending the convent's gardens, orchards, and livestock. Finally, between 10 and 15 % of the obediences involved the production of high quality gold-embroidery work and the painting of icons, both of which also were simultaneously a form of religious activity, a medium of spiritual and creative expression for individual sisters, and a highly profitable enterprise for the convent. In the 1820s, for example, the convent's income from the sale of gold embroidery work ranged between 4000 and 7000 rubles per year, a sum that greatly exceeded the amount it received from its state subvention and the rents from state-granted benefices combined [Wagner 2010, p. 91].¹⁴ This additional income was critical for enabling the convent to absorb an expanded membership.

The reorganization of the convent also appears to have contributed to the changes in the social composition of its membership that occurred during the nineteenth century, although here too external developments again clearly played a significant role. While some of these changes proved to be transitory, others were more enduring. In the context of the religious revival that took place among Russian social and cultural elites in the early nineteenth century, for example, the elevation of the convent's visibility and stature resulting from its embodiment of the ideals of monastic reform led to a brief increase in the number of noblewomen and widows and daughters of military officers who entered the convent (although recorded separately, military officers held noble status). The personal qualities and public activities of Abbess Dorofeia, a well-connected member of the provincial landowning nobility and widow of a high-ranking military officer, the incessant

¹⁴ In the late eighteenth century the state granted most monastic communities a modest amount of arable land, a mill, and exclusive rights to a fishing area that, in the case of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross, during the first half of the nineteenth century together with its subvention yielded an annual income of about 2000 rubles.

warfare of the period, and the support for the convent among noble families temporarily evacuated from Moscow to Nizhnii Novgorod in 1812 quite likely also contributed to this surge in membership from the social elite (Table 7) [Lebedev 1867; Lushin 2006; TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, d. 88, ll. 10ob-2]. While women from the families of military officers had long been represented in the convent's membership, the presence of noblewomen without this background had previously been rare (Table 1). More enduringly, the ability of the now cenobitic convent to support a larger number of members, an ability reinforced by its relocation in 1815 from a relatively cramped site near the Nizhnii Novgorod kremlin to more spacious quarters on the outskirts of the city, enabled it to accommodate more women from the unprivileged and poorer strata of urban society (*meshchanstvo*) and from the peasantry. Again, although both groups had previously been represented in the convent's membership, their numbers increased substantially and — apart from a brief decline in the 1860s — continuously after its reorganization (Tables 1 and 7).¹⁵ The expansion of the convent's resources similarly enabled it to absorb a significant increase in the number of women from the clerical estate who entered the convent from the 1830s to the 1850s. As a result of these developments, the membership of the convent became socially more diverse during the first half of the nineteenth century, with most groups in the ethnically Russian population being represented to some degree (Table 7).

This diversity at first increased modestly and then narrowed considerably under the conditions created by the abolition of serfdom, the Alexandrine reform era in general, and the social, economic, and cultural developments of the post-emancipation period. Similar to the early nineteenth century, these conditions had both transitory and longer-lasting effects. In the short-term, the dislocations and heated debates over monasticism and the education and social roles of women, in combination with increased public activism characterizing the early years of the reform era, helped produce a temporary surge in the number of noblewomen entering the convent as well as a more modest increase in the number of women from merchant families doing so. As in the earlier period, this surge may also have been due partly to the personality and activities of the new abbess, Asenefa (1858–1868), like Dorofeia, a well-connected noblewoman who actively promoted a wider social role for the convent. But the number of entrants to the convent from both the nobility and the merchant class declined sharply after the mid-1880s (Table 7). By contrast, the number of entrants from the *meshchanstvo* and the peasantry dipped significantly in the 1860's, possibly because of limitations on membership imposed by the convent in the uncertain economic conditions surrounding the emancipation. This demographic, however, was to recover in the 1870s and then, in the case of the peasantry, rise rapidly from the 1880s on. Exhibiting yet a different pattern, the number of women from the clerical estate entering the convent remained relatively constant at the level attained by the late 1850s until the early twentieth century, when it appears to have begun to decline. As a result of these various trends, by the early 1890s the social composition of the convent's membership had narrowed to women from largely three groups: the clerical estate, the *meshchanstvo*, and the peasantry, with the latter group constituting half of the convent's total membership and well over half its newest and youngest members. The preponderance of peasant women at the convent had grown even more pronounced by the early twentieth century (Table 7), transforming its membership in tandem with the changing population of Nizh-

¹⁵ Prior to the 1850's, about half of all peasants who entered the convent were freed serfs. Generally lacking any means of support, such women typically were in a particularly vulnerable position.

nii Novgorod, which like other major Russian cities at this time experienced a strong upsurge in peasant in-migration [Evtuhov 2006; Smirnov 1995; Smirnov 2001; Brower 1990; Mironov 1999, vol. 1, pp. 320–323, 420–422; Engel 1996].

These differences in trends over time among the various social groups that composed the membership of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross indicate how the combination of institutional reorganization and changing external circumstances differentially influenced the decision by women in different social groups to undertake a monastic life and, by doing so, helped transform the character and social roles of the convent during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is not to discount the religious motivation of the women who entered the convent during these years. But as research particularly on Catholic religious orders has demonstrated, people typically undertake a religious life for a combination of religious, personal, emotional, and practical reasons, and historical context strongly affects the relative appeal of such a life for different groups of women [Wittberg 1994, pp. 55–70, 132, 194–198; Hillery 1990; Vicinus 1985; Prelinger 1986].

Considered from this perspective, the apparent appeal of a monastic life for women from different social groups exhibited both notable continuities and significant change between the early eighteenth century and 1917 as measured by their presence over time in the membership of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross and its predecessors. Despite some fluctuation, for example, the attraction of monasticism for women from the clerical estate and from the lower middling and unprivileged strata of urban society (ultimately, the *meshchanstvo*) remained significant across the entire period, although as already noted, in the nineteenth century there was a shift from older to younger, unmarried women and the number of women from both groups rose substantially after the reorganization of the convent (Table 7). Conversely, apart from a brief period between the 1840's and the 1870's, a monastic life, at least one at a convent within the diocese, appears to have had little appeal for women from the more well-to-do urban commercial or, later, professional social groups (Table 7). The very low representation of women from the merchant class is particularly striking given the consistently strong material support this group provided to the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross and its predecessors.

For other groups of women, by contrast, the relative appeal of a monastic life changed significantly after the mid-nineteenth century, appearing to decline as their educational and employment opportunities, possibilities for social and public activism, and cultural choices expanded. For example, having previously constituted a significant presence at the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross and its predecessors, widows and daughters of state officials virtually disappeared from the convent's membership after the early 1850's. By the end of the century, as already noted, so too did noblewomen, including widows and daughters of military officers. In the early twentieth century, the number of women from the clerical estate entering the convent also began to decline, though much less precipitously (Table 7).

The most striking change in the social composition of the convent's membership during the post-emancipation period, however, and one that was experienced widely and that affected male as well as female monasticism, was the rapid increase in the number of peasants pursuing a monastic vocation, especially after the early 1880's (Table 7). Of course, even in the eighteenth century peasants had composed a significant percentage of the membership of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross and its predecessors. Judging by the social background of the supernumerary nuns transferred to the convent after 1764 owing to the dissolution of their original convents, peasants appear to

have constituted an even higher percentage of the membership of most of these convents (Table 1). They also represented a substantial proportion of the women who joined the informal communities that formed in Nizhnii Novgorod diocese in the wake of Catherine's reforms, and their numbers increased significantly at the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross after its reorganization on a communal basis enabled it to support a larger community (Table 7).

The appeal of a monastic life among peasant women in the late imperial period therefore was not new. What had changed were the extent and relative attractiveness of this appeal and the ability of peasant women to respond to it. Two developments in particular appear to have broadened and enhanced the attraction of monasticism among peasant women during the post-emancipation period: their increased exposure to a monastic life, both directly and indirectly, as a result of the substantial growth of pilgrimage to monastic sites that occurred at this time, and the proliferation and wide dissemination of popular religious literature idealizing this form of life that also took place. Perhaps even more importantly the abolition of serfdom increased peasant women's mobility and enabled more of them to undertake a monastic life, while the growth of convents and of officially recognized women's religious communities increased the opportunity for them to do so [Kirichenko 2010; Meehan-Waters 1986; Meehan-Waters 1992; Miller 2013; Wagner 2006]. There was some benefit for peasant households, moreover, in having a daughter join a monastic community, since a dowry then would not have to be paid and a family link with a site of divine intercessory power would be established. More negatively, increased male out-migration to urban areas especially after the mid-1880's created an imbalance of women in many villages in the Nizhnii Novgorod region. As a result, marriage and the formation of households, which were vital to peasant survival and largely determined the status of women within peasant communities, became more difficult. The disruptions caused by the rural unrest and agrarian reforms of the early twentieth century added to this problem [Gudkov, Kuznetsov, and Sarychev 1985, pp. 82–3; Belous and Shmelev 1998, pp. 206–8; Miller 2009, pp. 132–4]. Under these conditions, the possibility of undertaking a monastic life was one of the few options available to young peasant women, and consequently it is not surprising that the number choosing it rose. As their predominance even within urban convents such as the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross increased, a self-perpetuating momentum that drew still more peasant women into a monastic life through the operation of family and village networks quite likely developed. By changing the social complexion of these convents, this growing peasant predominance may also help explain the decline in new members from the privileged strata of urban society that occurred at this time [Wagner 2006, Tables A5–A7; Trzebiatowska and Bruce, pp. 22–3].

Perhaps surprisingly, as the membership of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross grew more plebian over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it also became more literate. Although reports from the eighteenth century did not indicate the literacy level of members of either the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross or its predecessors, the high number of nuns unable to sign their name and the relative absence of non-liturgical books in the convents' libraries during this period suggest that the incidence of literacy was low [TsANO, f. 570, op. 552 za 1738 g., d. 142; op. 555 za 1796 g., d. 39, ll. 20 ob. — 22; RGADA, f. 280, op. 6, d. 3186, ll. 2–5 ob., 6 ob., 14 ob. — 18, 21 ob., d. 4239, ll. 2 ob. — 4 ob., 7, 8–10; op. 7, d. 314, ll. 1–14; *Pistovaia i perepisnaia knigi* 2011, cols. 26–8,

40–43].¹⁶ But to the extent that this in fact was the situation, it had altered significantly by the early nineteenth century. As Table 8 shows, by 1816 the incidence of literacy among members of the convent had already become comparatively high, particularly for the time. Applying the definition of literacy used by the imperial state and subsequently by historians, i.e. the ability to read, in that year 68 % of the women at the convent were listed as literate, in comparison with Boris Mironov's estimate for 1817 of between 3.4–7.2 % of all rural women and 8.3–18.0 % of all urban women in European Russia [Mironov 1991, p. 240; Rashin 1951].

Mirroring society in general, there was wide variation in the incidence of literacy among the members of the convent from different social backgrounds. The possession of at least some level of literacy was substantially higher among noblewomen, the widows and daughters of military officers, and women from the clerical estate and the merchantry than among women from the peasantry and the *meshchanstvo*. But even for these latter two groups, the incidence of literacy was higher for women at the convent (38 % and 59 % respectively) than for rural and urban women in European Russia as a whole. Although the surge of women, particularly from the peasantry and the *meshchanstvo*, into the convent during the late 1820s and the 1830s, and then again after emancipation, temporarily increased the incidence of illiteracy at the convent, the trend among all social groups over the course of the nineteenth century was toward greater incidences and higher levels of literacy. Thus, for example, by 1902 100 % of women from all social groups other than the peasantry and the *meshchanstvo* possessed some level of literacy, and the incidence of literacy among these latter two groups was 61 % and 93 % respectively (Table 8).

This compares with only 17 % for all rural women and 53 % for all urban women in European Russia by 1907 [Mironov 1991, p. 240; Rashin 1951].¹⁷ Even if only the level of literacy among women at the time they entered the convent is considered, since a substantial number of initially illiterate women acquired some level of literacy while at the convent, the same patterns and trends are observable (Table 9). Similarly, by 1902 nearly every woman from a privileged social estate and from the clergy possessed full literacy, the ability to write as well as to read, as did two-thirds of the women from the *meshchanstvo* and one third of the women from the peasantry (Table 8).

To some degree, the different patterns in the growth of literacy exhibited by women at the convent from different social groups reflect the differential availability of informal as well as formal means of education for girls in these groups. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, the possibility of acquiring literacy in the home or privately was much greater for girls from the nobility, the clerical estate, and the families of state officials than for *meshchanki* and peasant girls. Formal education for girls from the nobility, the clerical estate, and privileged urban groups became available on a very limited basis in Nizhnii Novgorod and a few other cities in the province only in the first part of the nineteenth century. Only with the development of state, *zemstvo*, parish, and diocesan schools after the 1860s did formal education become more broadly available for girls within the urban and rural populations [*Pamiatnaia kniga* 1865; Gatsiskii 1877; Vinogradov 1896; *Nizhegorodskii ezhegodnik* 1915; Bukova, unpublished paper; Kudriavtsev 1916].

¹⁶ A low incidence of literacy would be consistent with assessments of literacy in general among the urban population and women in eighteenth-century Russia [Mironov 1991].

¹⁷ The incidence of literacy at other convents in Nizhnii Novgorod by the early twentieth century was comparably high, and both Miller and Meehan-Waters note similar trends in literacy in the communities they studied [TsANO, f. 570, op. 559 za 1906, d. 62; Miller 2009, pp. 150–158; B. Meehan-Waters 1992, pp. 127–9].

*Table 8. Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Literacy Level, By Social Estate, 1816–1902 (%)*

FL=Full Literacy, ability to read and write; PL=Partial Literacy; ability to read only; NL=No Literacy

	Clergy			Honored Citizens			Merchants			Meshchanstvo			Enlisted			Military: Officers			Nobility			Peasants			State Officials			Overall		
	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL
1816	41	41	18	--	--	--	0	100	0	12	47	41	33	17	50	62	15	23	83	17	0	23	15	62	86	0	14	41	27	32
1836	22	39	39	--	--	--	50	50	0	29	25	46	50	30	20	10	60	30	83	17	0	13	33	54	40	40	20	24	35	41
1856	50	37	13	--	--	--	60	20	20	35	35	30	50	17	33	33	67	0	86	14	0	28	28	44	50	50	0	41	31	28
1876	61	27	12	--	--	--	50	38	12	42	26	32	30	30	40	100	0	0	79	14	7	20	27	53	0	0	100	42	26	32
1896	94	6	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	63	24	13	80	20	0	--	--	--	100	0	0	42	15	43	--	--	--	62	14	24
1902 ¹	98	2	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	66	27	7	67	33	0	--	--	--	100	0	0	36	25	39	--	--	--	58	20	22

Sources: ТаАНО, ф. 582, оп. 1, dd. 47, 129, 329, 460, 588, 631.

¹ The reports for 1906 and 1917 record only the total number of probationers (126 and 230 respectively).

Table 9. Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Literacy Level of Women Entering the Convent, By Social Estate, 1816–1902 (%)
 FL=Full Literacy, ability to read and write; PL=Partial Literacy, ability to read only; NL=No Literacy

	Clergy			Honored Citizens			Merchants			Meshchanstvo			Enlisted			Military: Officers			Nobility			Peasants			State Officials			Other			
	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	FL	PL	NL	
Women Entering Between:																															
1810–1835	15	49	36	--	--	--	50	50	0	15	44	41	24	38	38	13	60	27	50	25	25	11	30	59	33	33	33	25	50	25	
1836–1861	67	27	6	--	--	--	50	25	25	31	44	25	40	10	50	100	0	0	88	6	6	18	24	58	50	0	67	33	0		
1861–1885	74	11	15	100	0	0	50	50	0	36	17	47	40	40	20	--	--	--	75	0	25	5	24	71	0	100	0	50	50	0	
1886–1902 ¹	92	8	0	--	--	--	100	0	0	54	23	23	50	50	0	--	--	--	100	0	0	36	14	50	--	--	--	43	14	43	

Percentage of women who were illiterate upon entering the convent but who attained some level of literacy:

1810–1835; 25	1836–1861; 29	1861–1885; 43	1886–1902 ¹ ; 34
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Sources: TaANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 47, 129, 329, 460, 588, 631.

¹ The reports for 1906 and 1917 record only the total number of probationers (126 and 230 respectively).

Given this pattern in the development of formal education for girls in Nizhnii Novgorod province, the incidence of literacy among members of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross demonstrated during the nineteenth century was remarkably high.

The disproportionately high incidence of literacy exhibited by women from virtually every social group at the convent suggests that during the nineteenth century the ability to read spiritual literature had acquired increased importance as a medium of piety and spiritual development for members of the convent. The large number of works of spiritual edification contained in the convent's library by the middle of the century, in stark contrast to the situation in the eighteenth century, supports this conclusion [TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, d. 12, ll. 14–15ob, d. 25, d. 114^a, ll. 35–9, d. 249, and d. 335, ll. 23^a–30o6; Wagner 2010, p. 89]. The comparatively high incidence of literacy among *meshchanki* and peasant women entering the convent especially after the mid-1880's, 77 % and 50 % respectively (Table 9), also suggests that the combination of increased schooling and the widespread dissemination of popular religious publications at this time may have played an important role in attracting these women to a monastic life. Supporting this possibility, one advocate of spreading literacy among peasant women observed at the turn of the century that parents in fact often resisted allowing their daughters to attend school in part because they believed that teaching girls to read caused them “to take on airs” and go off to a convent

Table 10. Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Geographic Origin, Entire Membership, 1876–1917 (%)¹

	1876	1887	1896	1902	1906 ²	1917 ²
Iaroslavl	0	0	0	0	1	1
Kazan	0	1	1	1	1	1
Kostroma	4	3	5	5	5	7
Moscow	2	2	2	1	2	3
Nizhnii Novgorod	68	70	66	66	64	68
Orel	1	1	1	0	1	0
Penza	7	5	4	3	2	1
Perm	1	2	2	1	1	2
Riazan	0	0	1	1	1	0
St. Petersburg	0	1	1	1	1	0
Saratov	0	0	0	0	1	1
Smolensk	0	0	1	1	1	1
Tambov	3	3	4	4	3	1
Tula	0	1	1	1	1	1
Viatka	2	5	8	9	7	10
Vitebsk	1	0	0	0	1	1
Vladimir	2	3	2	2	2	2
Vologda	1	0	1	0	1	0
Unknown	2	1	0	1	5	0

Sources: TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 460, 531, 588, 631; f. 570, op. 559 za 1906 g., d. 62, za 1917 g., d. 56a.

¹ Information on geographic origin was not regularly recorded in earlier reports, although incomplete data for 1856 and 1866 indicate the same pattern as in later reports.

² Because the reports for 1906 and 1917 reported only the aggregate number of probationers (126 and 230 respectively) and did not provide individual information for these women, the totals and percentages for these years include only nuns and novices.

*Table 11. Nizhnii Novgorod Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross
Geographic Origin, Probationers and Novices, 1876–1917 (%)*¹

	1876	1887	1896	1902	1906 ²	1917 ²
Iaroslavl	1	0	0	0	0	0
Kaluga	1	1	1	0	0	0
Kazan	0	1	1	1	1	0
Kostroma	3	4	6	7	9	9
Moscow	3	3	2	1	3	3
Nizhnii Novgorod	70	72	67	66	68	73
Penza	5	3	2	2	0	0
Perm	2	1	2	1	1	0
Riazan	1	1	1	1	1	0
St. Petersburg	1	1	1	1	0	0
Smolensk	1	0	1	1	0	0
Tambov	3	2	3	4	4	1
Tula	0	1	1	1	0	0
Viatka	4	7	10	12	10	13
Vitebsk	2	0	0	0	0	0
Vladimir	2	3	2	2	1	1
Vologda	2	1	1	0	0	0
Unknown	1	1	0	1	0	0

Sources: TsANO, f. 582, op. 1, dd. 460, 531, 588, 631; f. 570, op. 559 za 1906 g., d. 62, za 1917 g., d. 56a.

¹ Information on geographic origin was not regularly recorded in earlier reports, although incomplete data for 1856 and 1866 indicate the same pattern as in later years.

² Because the reports for 1906 and 1917 reported only the aggregate number of probationers (126 and 230 respectively) and did not provide individual information for these women, these totals and percentages include only novices.

[Preobrazhenskii 1900, pp. 32–5]. To the degree that the latter indeed occurred, education in this instance increased rather than diminished the appeal of a monastic vocation.

Finally, in contrast to the first three trends examined, the geographic origin of members of the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exhibited considerable continuity with the late eighteenth century. As Table 10 demonstrates, although the convent drew its membership from a larger number and geographically broader range of provinces than previously, it continued to attract women predominantly from Nizhnii Novgorod province (64–70 %), with most other members coming from the neighboring provinces of Viatka, Kostroma, Penza, Tambov, and Vladimir.¹⁸ This same pattern also characterized the place of origin of the newest members of the community, probationers and novices (Table 11). The consistency of this pattern across time attests to the considerable but primarily regional stature that the convent enjoyed as an Orthodox spiritual center, and an exemplar of monastic life for Orthodox women, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹⁸ Information on the province of prior residence was reported regularly only from 1876; prior to which information on former residence was not consistently or comprehensively recorded.

Conclusion

Over the course of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross thus was transformed from a small community composed mainly of older and largely illiterate women, predominantly widows, that possessed limited means into a large and wealthy community that appealed overwhelmingly to young, unmarried, and disproportionately literate women, increasingly from the unprivileged urban and especially rural strata of society. This transformation resulted in large part from the interaction between the internal reorganization of the convent on a communal basis and developments in its external environment. As our analyses of the trends in the convent's membership make clear, the decision — and for some women the ability — to enter the convent between the eighteenth century and 1917 was strongly influenced both by how these latter developments affected a woman's particular worldly status, circumstances, prospects, and location and by the ability of the convent to support her. In a subsequent article, we will demonstrate how the internal values and practices of the convent — again resulting partly from its communal organization — also contributed to the trends in the convent's membership during the late imperial period that led to its transformation.

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